

VIII. OPERATIONS ISSUES

INTRODUCTION

Division of Parks and Recreation staff identified the major park issues facing Jones Lake State Park at the initiation of the general management plan process. The issues have been divided into three categories: natural resources (see Chapter VI), capital improvements (see Chapter VII) and operations. This chapter identifies park operations issues and makes recommendations for addressing them during the next five years. Operations issues for Jones Lake State Park that are of significant concern are:

1. Low visitor use / lack of facilities
2. Need for a usable hiking trail system
3. Hike-in primitive camping at Salter's Lake
4. Modernize the tent and trailer camping area
5. Boundary management
6. Furnishings for the park visitor's center
7. Need for a safety zone on game lands abutting the park
8. Construction of an equipment storage building
9. Communications issues
10. Property needs
11. Bushy Lake State Natural Area
12. Staffing Needs

LOW VISITOR USE / LACK OF FACILITIES

Background

Jones Lake State Park was opened to the public in 1939 as the first state park established for use by African Americans, and the park remained segregated until the 1960s. The apex of park popularity seems to have occurred in the 1950s and 1960s, when the park served a population that had few other recreational opportunities available to them. Since those busy days, visitation to the park's day-use area has diminished, and even on the busiest weekends the park is no longer crowded. Jones Lake has not expanded its range of recreational offerings since the 1960s, and over the years, amenities offered to park visitors have actually diminished.

Recommendations

Construct an eight-table rental picnic shelter. The twelve table shelter that the park currently operates is the park's most heavily used facility, and it is generally reserved on both Saturdays and Sundays throughout the spring and summer months. A new capital improvement project to construct such a shelter has been created and is contained in Chapter VII.

Upgrade the beach and swimming area. Many visitors express a reluctance to use the Jones Lake swimming area due to the dark appearance of the water and because they believe the beach area harbors snakes. Though nothing could be done to change the color of the water, the beach and swimming areas can be upgraded to reduce the snaky appearance. Trees, vegetation and the associated root masses should be pulled out of the water and removed from the vicinity of the swimming area after environmental review. The sand beach can be widened and renourished with clean, white, screened sand.

Upgrade the park's fleet of pedal boats by replacing two-seated pedal boats with four-seated pedal boats. The park currently rents four two-seated boats and two four-seated boats. Experience at other North Carolina state parks has shown that the boats that can accommodate four riders are vastly more popular with park patrons. Install two high quality sand horseshoe courts in the playfield area.

NEED FOR A USABLE HIKING TRAIL SYSTEM

Background

Hiking is a basic recreational pursuit that should be offered at all North Carolina State Parks. Jones Lake currently does not have a hiking trail suitable for use by the public. The one hiking trail at Jones Lake State Park is poorly routed, constructed and maintained, and it gets little use. The "Lake Trail" is 13,100 feet in length and routed on wet organic soils through heavily vegetated bay forest. Consequently, the trail tread does not hold up to pedestrian traffic and has become a deep, wet ditch, and standing water is present along the trail in all seasons. Protruding roots and cypress knees abound, forcing the hiker to constantly monitor his or her foot placement. The current trail traverses only one habitat type, bay forest. The vegetation is thick, and it aggressively invades the trail corridor following mechanical trimming. Frequent trimming has given the vegetation bordering the trail a hedge like appearance, and the prolific growth impedes the view of the surrounding forest. Due to the dearth of habitat types, the trail is boring and lacks inspiration.

Recommendations

Complete the rerouting and trail-hardening project recently proposed to the Division's management. This project will include: (1) abandoning much of the old trail which travels through the wet bay forest; (2) rerouting the trail tread to existing service roads located on mineral soils; and (3) hardening with gravel or boardwalks those sections of trail which cannot be removed from the wet bay forest. The proposed new loop trail will be 26,160 feet in length and cross several diverse habitat types.

Construct a spur trail leading from the new loop trail to Salter's Lake. This spur trail will be approximately 6,250 feet in length and will provide access to a scenic overview of the large and undeveloped Carolina bay lake. A capital improvement project to make trail improvements is described in Chapter VII.

HIKE-IN PRIMITIVE CAMPING AT SALTER'S LAKE

Background

Salter's Lake is the only large, open water Carolina bay lake in North Carolina that is totally devoid of human development and visible impacts. As such, Salter's Lake offers opportunities for a true wilderness experience, which is increasingly rare in southeastern North Carolina. The lake itself covers approximately 330 acres and is surrounded by high quality sand rim, pine flatwoods, and wet pine woodlands habitats. The Division of Parks and Recreation is committed to allowing public access to this rare and pristine environment, but wishes to allow recreational use in such a manner as to reduce human impacts on the resource.

Currently, access is allowed through a permit system that requires a member of the public wishing to visit Salter's Lake to first locate a park ranger. The park ranger then accompanies the individual to the park office and a permit is issued. The ranger must then escort the visitor to Salter's Lake, crossing Bladen Lakes State Forest and Wildlife Resources Commission gamelands before passing through a gate along the state park boundary. The visitor is asked to secure the gate upon leaving the Salter's Lake area, and to drop off the permit in the park mailbox, thereby alerting ranger staff that they have left the area. The system is cumbersome and time consuming, causing it to also be unpopular with the public and park staff. Less than ten such permits are issued annually.

The access road to Salter's Lake is almost entirely outside the park boundaries, is less than 8 feet wide in many places, and is poorly maintained. Often Salter's Lake users bring trailered boats to use in the lake. No boat ramp has been established at Salter's Lake, consequently these individuals must back considerable distances into the lake in order to take the boat on and off the trailer.

Recommendations

Do away with the current permitting system and vehicle and boating access to Salter's Lake. Access should be hike-in only through the aforementioned trail system in order to maintain a wilderness experience. To provide recreational opportunities, two hike-in primitive campsites should be constructed along the sand rim near the lake. Amenities should only include a vault type toilet (or a pit privy) and a secure fire ring at each campsite.

MODERNIZE THE TENT AND TRAILER CAMPING AREA

Background

Jones Lake State Park currently has 20 tent and trailer campsites that offer minimal amenities to the campground users. Campsites are bare sand and each contains a fire ring, a picnic table and a trash can. Only one campsite (#3) has electrical and water

hookups. Frequent raking has left each campsite in a depression; consequently rainwater does not drain from the sites as quickly as desirable. The boundaries of each campsite are not well defined; hence some sites have sprawled outward and led to problems associated with soil compaction and vegetative destruction. The centrally located washhouse, which serves both the tent and trailer campground and the group campsite, was constructed in 1956 and fails to adequately meet the needs of the park. The washhouse is not ADA compliant, suffers from extremely low ceilings and doorways, and has no storage space for cleaning chemicals, paper supplies or tools.

Camping is a basic recreational activity at Jones Lake State Park, appreciated by many park users. The most popular site by far is the one site that offers water and electrical hookups. The park receives telephone calls daily inquiring about the availability of campsites suitable for recreational vehicles. The ability to use electrical hookups, and to a lesser extent water hookups, is extremely important to these recreational vehicle enthusiasts. Jones Lake State Park does not have any handicapped accessible campsites, nor is there a dump station in the park.

Recommendations

Update the Jones Lake campground by demolishing the old washhouse and replacing it with a modern handicapped accessible washhouse. Install one or two handicapped accessible campsites with paved drives and picnic table pads and paved walkways leading to the washhouse. Upgrade one-half of the campsites to include water and 50-amp electrical hookups. Every campsite should be delineated with timber borders and backfilled with clean, screened sand. Add a few additional campsites to the existing camping area if possible. Construct a dump station near the entrance to the campground. A capital improvement project to make campground improvements is described in Chapter VII.

BOUNDARY MANAGEMENT

Background

Jones Lake State Park (1930 acres) and its satellite, Bushy Lake State Natural Area (approximately 3,700 acres), have many miles of park boundary abutting state forests, state game lands, and private properties. These boundary lines predominately traverse heavily vegetated areas with wet organic soils. A recent survey located all of the boundaries and corners of the Jones Lake State Park for the first time since the development of the park. This survey also uncovered an attempt by park neighbors to claim over seven acres of park property as their own. Park staff has been diligently clearing a boundary corridor, painting and signing witness trees, and installing Carsonite markers along the recently surveyed boundaries. Even with this concerted effort, only two-thirds of the Jones Lake boundary has been cleared and well marked in ten months. None of the vastly larger Bushy Lake boundary is cleared or marked. Current park staff is only vaguely familiar with the boundaries of the Bushy Lake SNA property. Jones Lake and Bushy Lake both suffer from heavy hunting pressure,

especially from deer and bear hunters utilizing dogs. Each property also suffers from illegal dumping, ATV use, and the poaching of plants and plant material.

Recommendations

Jones Lake State Park staff needs to meet with Resource Management staff and ensure that Jones Lake has a complete set of deeds and descriptions of the properties owned by the Division at Bushy Lake SNA. Park staff will then determine which boundaries may be located by park staff and which boundaries will need to be surveyed prior to marking. A surveyor should then be hired to locate all unknown corners and boundaries. Approximately 90% of the Bushy Lake boundaries are unknown to the park staff. In addition, the park should purchase a 90-horse power tractor with a fully enclosed safety cage, belly pan, and Brown's Tree Cutter type attachment. Equipment of this type will allow the park staff to efficiently demarcate the boundary without the extremely time consuming task of hand clearing the boundary corridor. This equipment will also be extremely helpful in resource management duties such as fire-line clearing, mechanical removal of shrubby and unwanted undergrowth, and preparing areas for reestablishment of eastern white cedar forest. The park will also need to obtain a 1.5-ton dump truck in order to facilitate the trailering and hauling of the equipment. The dump truck and tree cutter equipment could also be used at Lake Waccamaw and other nearby state park areas.

FURNISHINGS FOR THE PARK VISITOR'S CENTER

Background

Construction is currently underway on the Jones Lake State Park visitor's center and associated facilities. This project is constructing a basic visitor's center, which will include modern interpretive exhibits, an auditorium, classroom with wet lab capabilities, and administrative space. Other improvements addressed by this project include the construction of a bathhouse and refreshment stand, repairs to the existing park pier and boathouse, and repaving the day-use area parking lot. During North Carolina's recent budgetary shortfalls, \$100,000 that had been allocated to purchase furnishings for the visitor's center was remanded to the state. These funds had been intended to purchase items such as classroom tables, classroom chairs, auditorium chairs, bookshelves, audio-visual equipment, interpretive equipment, staff computers, etc. The park is currently without funding to furnish the visitor's center that is scheduled to open to the public in the spring of 2005.

Recommendations

Purchase furnishings and educational equipment that will allow the Jones Lake Visitor's Center to fulfill its intended mission. Miscellaneous visitor's center construction costs may provide a source of funds for furnishings and educational equipment. Construction staff will investigate this possibility.

NEED FOR A SAFETY ZONE ON GAME LANDS ABUTTING THE PARK

Background

Jones Lake State Park is almost entirely surrounded by state game lands. Many park facilities such as the organized group camp, the family campground, and hiking trails fall within just a few yards of the game lands. The vast majority of the property at Jones Lake State Park is unsuitable for development, hence facilities cannot be moved further into the interior of the state park. The game lands surrounding Jones Lake are only popular with hunters utilizing dogs and those who tend to be armed with shotguns. These hunters generally take quick shots at game that is being pursued by a pack of dogs. Consequently, the hunter must quickly acquire a target and make a determination as to whether to fire upon that target. This type of hunting is inherently dangerous for others who may be occupying the forest. Just this past hunting season, the windshield was shot out of a vehicle that was being operated on Sweet Home Church Road near the state park. Loud shots are often heard in the campgrounds, frightening park users and leading to numerous complaints. Frequently, hunting dogs venture into the park, upsetting and frightening park visitors and disrupting wildlife.

Recommendations

Negotiate with the Division of Forest Resources in order to establish 1000-foot safety zones around the state park's boundaries. Where possible, safety zone boundaries should be established along roadways, fire lines, and ditch lines to increase effectiveness and to facilitate placement and maintenance of signage. Because Turnbull Creek Educational State Forest is a safety zone, the Division of Forest Resources is obviously aware of the need to separate hunting from non-compatible other public uses.

CONSTRUCTION OF AN EQUIPMENT STORAGE BUILDING

Background

Jones Lake State Park has expensive mechanical equipment that must be stored in the open. It is exposed to the sun, wind, rain, dirt, and debris due to the lack of covered storage space. This equipment includes park tractors, fire fighting trucks and equipment, hydraulic implements, park boats, etc.

Recommendation

Construct a covered storage structure (pole shed) within the fenced area of the Jones Lake State Park maintenance area. A capital improvement project to construct an equipment storage shed/warehouse is included in Chapter VII.

COMMUNICATIONS ISSUES

Background

Currently Jones Lake State Park has extremely poor communications capabilities. Radio contact with park units at Bushy Lake SNA is intermittent at best. There are no radio communications between Jones Lake and Bladen County law enforcement, other county emergency services, the Division of Forest Resources personnel, or the officers of the Wildlife Resources Commission. Jones Lake State Park and its sister park, Singletary Lake State Park, operate on two separate radio frequencies, making communications between the parks difficult. Jones Lake staff is unable to access the Singletary Lake repeater from Jones Lake. Currently, the default form of communication with outside agencies is cellular telephone. The Park Superintendent, Park Ranger III, and the BULA Ranger I have cellular phones. The other two rangers are generally without an efficient means of communication, especially when working closing shifts or weekends.

Recommendations

In the short term, continue to use the three cell phones to aid communication needs. The Division should contract with Bladen County to monitor Jones Lake and Singletary Lake traffic and to provide dispatch services for the law enforcement and emergency services function of the parks. If repeaters can be configured in such a manner as to allow both Jones Lake and Singletary Lake to run routine park radio traffic on one channel, the other channel could be monitored by Bladen dispatchers and only used by park staff for law enforcement and emergency services communications. In the past, the Bladen County Sheriff has been non-committal when asked about configuring his communications system to allow county dispatchers to access state park radio frequencies. The Division should pursue working with the county, perhaps offering a small payment for the county's assistance with communications.

PROPERTY NEEDS

Background

Jones Lake State Park has several small adjacent properties that have long been identified as needed for inclusion in the state park. Purchase of these properties would not only protect the watershed into Salter's Lake, but would move the park boundaries from bay forest to road frontage. Moving the boundary to the road frontage will facilitate better boundary marking, management and patrol.

Recommendation

Purchase the privately owned properties lying between Ruskin Road, Salter's Lake Trail, and Jones Lake State Park. These acquisitions should complete all property

needs at Jones Lake State Park. Land acquisition at Jones Lake is detailed in Chapter IX.

BUSHY LAKE STATE NATURAL AREA

The Division currently owns approximately 3,700 acres at Bushy Lake State Natural Area. Many additional tracts are being investigated for purchase by the park system. In the last couple of years, at least 700 acres have been added to Bushy Lake and as many as 5,000 acres will be added in the upcoming biennium. Properties historically being purchased at Bushy Lake are predominately wet pocosin and bay forest. Property owners are dividing tracts, keeping road frontage and residences, and selling the properties having little commercial or development use to the state. Problems arising from this practice include having boundaries that traverse extremely difficult habitat types and offer tenuous access to the state park properties. Often staff must travel through several private properties and cross numerous gates in order to access state park properties. The majority of the Bushy Lake properties are 25 to 30 miles from the operational center at Jones Lake. Patrols are sporadic and Bushy Lake suffers from heavy poaching, illegal ATV use, refuse dumping, etc.

Recommendation

Attempt to purchase properties at Bushy Lake State Natural Area with road frontage included. On tracts where immediate road access is impossible, ensure that deeded right-of-ways to properties are secured and that park staff are made aware of those right-of-ways. Purchase of an existing residence with the new properties to be added to Bushy Lake is likely to be preferable to construction of a new ranger residence there; if this is done, the capital improvement project to build a residence at Bushy Lake will be dropped. Placing a ranger residence at Bushy Lake State Natural Area will allow for a much increased presence in the area and will serve as a point of contact for park neighbors. Increased patrol opportunities and familiarity with the Bushy Lake State Natural Area, southern Cumberland County, and the neighboring landowners will lead to decreased violations of state park regulations.

Develop a management plan for Bushy Lake State Natural Area. This plan should address issues such as the need for a dedicated staff for Bushy Lake State Natural Area, the need for educational and administrative facilities at Bushy Lake, and the demand for basic visitor facilities such as restrooms and interpretive trails.

STAFFING NEEDS

Background

<u>Current Permanent Staff</u>	<u>Current Seasonal Staff (all 3 months)</u>
Park Superintendent II	General Utility Worker
Park Ranger III	2 Park Attendants
Park Ranger II	Peak Load Park Attendant
Park Ranger I	Peak Load Office Assistant II
Park Ranger I (BULA)	Bathhouse Manager
Maintenance Mechanic IV	Peak Load Bathhouse Clerk
Maintenance Mechanic II (BULA)	Chief Lifeguard
Office Assistant III	4 Lifeguards
	Peak Load Lifeguard

Jones Lake State Park generally has sufficient permanent staff to provide interpretation and educational duties, patrol and emergency response, and to offer basic recreational services at Jones Lake State Park. The park does not have enough permanent staff to address the enforcement needs at Bushy Lake State Natural Area or the basic resource management needs at either park. As previously discussed, two-thirds of the boundaries are not known nor are they marked. Clearing and maintaining boundaries in the thick, voracious bay vegetation found in these parks is extremely time consuming and manpower intensive. All habitats at Jones Lake and Bushy Lake are either fire dependant or fire tolerant. Due to the lack of controlled burning, the habitats that these parks are supposed to protect are degrading and becoming monotone pine woodland with a heavy, shrubby understory. The result is decreasing populations of herbaceous plants and reduced habitat for red-cockaded woodpeckers, fox squirrels, Hessel's Hairstreak butterflies, etc. Due to current staffing levels and burn practices, the Jones Lake staff is only able to burn approximately 40 acres per year.

A visitor's center, bathhouse, refreshment stand, and other facilities are currently under construction at Jones Lake. Generally, construction of a visitor's center in a state park will also entail the establishment of administrative support, maintenance, and seasonal positions to assist with the operation, cleaning, and repair of the facilities. The office assistant, maintenance mechanic and seasonal positions which were to be established as part of the Jones Lake State Park Visitor's Center project were lost due to recent state budgetary shortfalls. As a result, appropriate staff will not be available to keep the visitors center open to the public seven days per week. If this situation is not remedied, Jones Lake will be forced to shift maintenance staff from their existing duties to cleaning and maintaining the visitor's center and bathhouse. This will result in inefficiencies regarding their existing duties and induce further delays in the maintenance project backlog facing the park.

In 2003, for the first time in over a decade, Jones Lake State Park offered refreshment items such as cold soft drinks, snack foods, and ice cream for sale during the summer

operational season. These items were sold by the bathhouse staff that also issue swimming passes and rent pedal boats and canoes. To operate the refreshment stand/bathhouse, Jones Lake has only one 40-hour per week seasonal bathhouse manager and a 16-hour per week bathhouse clerk. Daily, park rangers must assist with bathhouse operation during times of heavy use and cover lunch breaks and convenience breaks for the bathhouse staff.

Recommendations

Establish an equipment operator position to operate heavy equipment used in clearing and maintaining park boundaries, roadways, trails, and fire lines. This employee would also play an integral role in the park resource management program, removing unwanted vegetation and ladder fuels, preparing for and staffing controlled burns, and performing wildfire suppression duties. This individual would also remove nuisance beaver dams at Bushy Lake that flood private property and park roads. Eventually, this individual would become involved in efforts to block and fill old drainage ditches and to rehabilitate wetland habitats. Having this position to take a lead role in maintaining park boundaries and fire line preparation will allow ranger staff to further concentrate on interpretation and education duties and patrol efforts at Bushy Lake State Natural Area.

Establish an Office Assistant position in order to provide visitor contact and information and to enable the new visitor's center to remain open to the public seven days per week. This position should be established to coincide with completion of the visitor's center.

To assist with the new visitor's center and bathhouse upkeep, repairs, and cleaning, establish a maintenance mechanic position. A greatly expanded wastewater pumping and treatment system will require licensing not possessed by current JONE maintenance staff. This maintenance mechanic will need to obtain a subsurface wastewater operators license. This individual will also perform controlled burning activities, grounds keeping, automotive, and equipment maintenance duties.

To provide for operation of the park refreshment stand and bathhouse, establish a three-month refreshment stand clerk position. To allow boat rentals and refreshment stand sales on the weekends during the busy spring and fall months, create a 26-week peak load refreshment stand position. This employee would work April through October.

Extend the existing seasonal General Utility Worker position from three months to nine months. Currently, Jones Lake has no seasonal staff to assist with general park maintenance and custodial tasks during the busy spring and fall months. Expanding the tenure of this seasonal position will enable ranger staff to commit additional time to educational, patrol, and resource management duties.

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